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Civilian pay issues and veterans' benefits led the list of topics discussed during a Joint Base town hall meeting with U.S. Rep. John Adler, July 13 at Timmermann Center.

The open meeting gave members of the McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst community a chance to voice concerns and issues with the congressman and gave the legislator time to discuss some of the projects he is working on in Washington, DC.

"It was a very useful and informative town hall meeting. I like the fact he talked about the bill dealing with the locality pay that will equalize the salaries between Fort Dix, McGuire and Lakehurst," said Leslie Pelegan, administrative officer, Directorate of Emergency Services.

Currently civilians working at Lakehurst Air Naval Engineering Station fall into a higher locality pay bracket than members of the McGuire and Fort Dix work force. Situated in Ocean County, Lakehurst falls in the New York City locality pay area and employees there receive nearly 5.5 percent more in their paychecks than Dix and McGuire workers who fall into the Philadelphia pay scale. For instance a GS-7 at Lakehurst makes \$42,837 a year while a GS-7 doing a similar job at McGuire makes \$40,591 a year.

Adler said that this disparity is discouraging for all the workers on the only tri-Joint Base in the county. Dix and McGuire workers feel frustrated that they are not paid the same for the same work and Lakehurst employees fear that their current pay will be frozen until their Joint Base counterparts catch up.

In an effort to rectify this problem, Adler introduced legislation in June which would equalize pay for civil servants across the Joint Base. He said he was continuing to work to impress upon the White House the need to equalize pay across McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst using the current budget. Adler said, "I am optimistic this will happen. I feel good it can get done by Oct.1," the date the

bases will officially merge.

"I hope we get it. It would be great if we could, but I would be a bit surprised because of the current situation trying to keeping costs down," said attendee Bill Howard, management analyst, Plans, Analysis, Integration Office. Howard added that he was impressed with the way Adler was trying to handle the issues raised during the forum.

One of those issues was what happens to Army specific programs such as Army Family Covenant when the bases merge. The Army Family Covenant is a pledge made by the Army to provide Soldiers and their families a certain quality of life. Adler deferred answering this question to Fort Dix Installation commander, Col. Patrick Slowey.

"We are going to ensure Army families continue to receive services. There is still going to be an ACS (Army Community Services). Those services, staffing and funds will still be available," said Slowey.

Adler also touched on the recent changes in the GI Bill. The Post-9/11 GI Bill offers expanded educational benefits for individuals with at least 90 days of aggregate service on or after September 11, 2001.

The bill takes effect on or after Aug. 1. According to Adler, New Jersey is a leader in providing servicemembers with opportunities to further their education and that the new GI Bill will make it easier for troops to use credits earned from non-traditional sources. Additional information on the new GI Bill can be found at www.gibill.va.gov.

Veteran's employment issues were also discussed. Adler said that returning veterans have a higher unemployment rate compared to non-servicemembers the same age.

"The unemployment rate is high," Adler told the crowd. "We're gonna struggle for awhile longer."

Adler is currently sponsoring legislation to help ease the financial burden faced by some returning veterans and said that there are programs in place to offer incentives for companies to hire former servicemembers.

He also addressed the issue of Government Pension Offset which was designed to minimize "double-dipping" or partaking in two separate government retirement plans.

One participant in the discussion, a widow, said she only receives \$30 a month from her late husband's retirement check because of the law.

Adler said he is working to change these laws to favor former civil servants, but the decision is stuck in Congress.

Adler offered to provide what assistance he could to the members of the audience.

"We must support the brave men and women who keep us safe," said Adler.